

HANDICAPPED

Edward F. McGrath

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Handicapped

by EDWARD F. MCGRATH, Director
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To SEE BETTY lightly playing the latest popular song on the piano as her sweet soprano voice leads the rest of the group in a community sing, you would never think she was a girl with a handicap. Watching her type rapidly and accurately, or take dictation efficiently, you would say she was the typical American working girl. She is indeed typical in appearance—tall, slender, neatly dressed—always in a manner fitting the occasion. Betty is indeed a lively vivacious girl, adding sunshine with her merry laughter, always ready with a bit of humor or a bright hello. It is only suddenly that you become aware that heavy glasses, not unbecoming to her pert face, make her in some small way different from her co-workers.¹

BLIND SINCE INFANCY

IT ALL STARTED in May 1926, four months after Harriet Elizabeth Murby was born in Providence, Rhode Island. Their first daughter after two sons was eagerly welcomed by Harriet and Ernest Murby. It was not until Betty was four months old that they realized she was not noticing things. They took her to doctors who could not give any definite reason for her blindness. She had several operations as an infant, as a result of which she could see objects and colors dimly—just enough to keep her from bumping into things.

As an infant, Betty remembers they lived in the country, where they had a roomy yard, neighborhood children for playmates, and a German police dog. She fell often when she played, cried briefly, and resumed her play. Mrs. Murby was casual about it, treating Betty as she did the others. She showed much wisdom, although she was only twenty-two when Betty was born. Betty remembers never receiving special privileges because of her blindness, and indeed she did not even realize she was blind until taunted by a playmate.

When Betty was five, Mrs. Murby was faced with a difficult decision—that of allowing Betty to leave home. Doctors and a social worker from Perkins

Institute for the Blind helped her to put Betty's well-being first. Perkins Institute helped Betty to increase the self-reliance Mrs. Murby had started. In kindergarten, after a few months of play, they started Braille reading almost at once, followed in future years by all the usual "reading, writing and arithmetic."

Her love for theatricals was developed early when she debuted as a flower seller in a play presented while in the third grade. As she grew older, school days were followed with choral singing, piano lessons, in addition to regular work. Dances, song contests, picnics and sports filled the time after classes. Visiting speakers, some former graduates of Perkins, told them of the life outside and gave them an awareness of the lack of understanding they might expect from sighted people. Theatricals blossomed into an operetta. Small groups went to Watertown where the bell system of traffic lights enabled them to cross streets without danger.

SUMMER VACATIONS

BETTY LOOKED forward especially to summer vacations. Then she had time for reading Braille books, outings, shopping with her mother and sister, and visiting her friends from Perkins. Mrs. Murby would take her to the train, and she would be met at her destination by her hostess.

At first, Betty wanted to be a teacher, but as she grew older, her interest turned to secretarial work. Her long supple fingers took readily to the typewriter and the Braille shorthand machine. In her last year at Perkins, she gained experience by doing the correspondence for the school superintendent.

The summer before Betty graduated, she readily accepted the suggestion that she try the business world. She forwent her summer vacation, and through the Bureau for the Blind, she obtained work in a Pawtucket factory stringing tags, for two months. As Betty tells it, "I learned easily—it was so simple. I was bored though, it was too routine. My sister worked there too for the summer, so we went back and forth together. There was a party every week among the employees, and I made many new friends. They expected me to be different—but, after a while, they

¹In connection with the National "Employ the Handicapped Week" during the first week of this month, this story of the employment of a handicapped person by a local welfare agency is presented.

with it may be entirely different from his feeling about his "personal" money or property which he acquired in pre-assistance days and was allowed to keep at the time of his application. He, therefore, feels that these resources are now entirely separate from his daily needs which are met by his grant.

This factor of transfer of property as it relates to need determination may easily be overlooked since its occurrence is more unusual than usual. It is easy to miss such factors in the interview and common for the client to undervalue the importance of bringing such information to the visitor's attention, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

It is suggested that there be joint evaluations on the part of the client and the agency as plans and decisions are evolved. This joint evaluation presupposes that a careful explanation of the program has been made to the recipient including a frank discussion of the policies of the agency. Too often the visitor may take for granted that someone—a former visitor, the county director, or some other welfare client perhaps—may have made this point clear to the recipient and so she never bothers to review points of eligibility. The client, having no access to authoritative information, obviously will tend to be less conscious of the eligibility requirements than the visitor.

FULL UNDERSTANDING

IF THE INFORMATION received during reviews from collaterals will affect the plan, then there should be a joint analysis and evaluation of it by the recipient and the visitor before a decision is made by the agency. When the agency's decision is reached by a process in which the person and the department participated throughout, the result is more likely to be mutually understood and accepted. The decision as to continuing eligibility should be based on information that is factual and realistic. Special care should be taken to see that the recipient fully understands the reasons for the decision, and he has the opportunity to present additional facts pertaining to his situation, and that he is aware of his right to a hearing.

These suggestions assist in establishing a good relationship between the client and the agency but sometimes elements creep in which make the transfer of property factor a difficult one to handle. The motivation behind the transfer may have something to do with this difficulty. An emotional need not connected with daily subsistence needs may enter in, bringing about new desires in conflict with frank planning with the visitor.

What are some of these motivations? They are probably as numerous as the cases in which they occur. Sometimes the motivation appears to be a last chance for the individual to show benevolence to someone for whom he would like to do something "nice" before he dies. The recipient may have a definite feeling of obligation to this person or it may be that he just wishes to be able to give from his abundance. (He may actually feel a bit "abundant" about this personal property which he has separated in his thinking from his need for food and clothing provided by his "pension" or assistance grant.)

Or the recipient may wish to have his home in his son's or daughter's name to avoid trouble or legal red tape over administration of estate at the time of his death. He may desire a particular person to have the handling of it at that time and derive comfort from the knowledge that this arrangement is already made. A widow may wish to have her son take care of any business involved in the payment of taxes and other obligations connected with the ownership of real estate. She always had such matters attended by her husband and the responsibility frightens her. This is only a meager sample of the innumerable explanations or motivations for property transfers.

OTHER MOTIVATIONS

WE HAVE KNOWN persons like the dependent widow, or the person who likes to have matters settled before death. I am acquainted with an old lady who labelled all the articles in her china cupboard and all her linens with a sealed tape not to be removed and read until after her death. A great feeling of satisfaction, completeness, and security is derived by such persons in having fixed the future, just as the old man feels that he can die many degrees happier if he can do something material to reward his neighbor for kindness or make amends for harsh treatment formerly accorded a son or daughter. We all hope to be well thought of when we die and that there will be a feeling of respect for our memory. These emotional elements can color one's thinking and do so in many cases. Sometimes the reason given the caseworker is the true reason. It may have been concocted, turned over in the client's mind and thought about until it seems to be the most plausible and acceptable reason. He gives it as such to the caseworker, and almost believes it himself.

So the worker wonders, although she can accept this motivation, or voiced motivation at least, can she accept his plan for property transfer? Is the plan consistent with the agency's policies for determination

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treated me just like everyone else. When we went swimming, no one said, 'Look out for poor Betty or she'll drown'."

The glasses she received just before the summer had brought the vision in her left eye up to 5/200. She couldn't see an eyechart but fingers held not too far away could be counted. Her hopes of ever being able to read had been dimmed by another operation a few years previous, but she could with glasses see clothes more distinctly, even though she couldn't distinguish features.

Betty was hoping for a stenographic career when she received her diploma, after thirteen years at Perkins. She was afraid, however, that work in a factory would be her lot. Through Mrs. Lenore Y. Gay, Administrator, Bureau for the Blind, she was brought to my attention. It is the policy of this department to aid wherever possible the employment of handicapped persons, so that we welcomed this opportunity to interview her. She impressed one with her intelligence, courage and ability, and she started work with the agency in December, 1945. After two and a half years I can say I have never had a single regret, not a complaint.

HER REACTIONS

TO QUOTE Betty again, "There were so many people I thought I'd never get to know them; it was confusing but I didn't worry. The second day I found my way to my desk alone. Mother or my brother took me to work at first; now that I know the way I often come alone. At closing time, one of the girls walks down with me to be sure I get on the right bus. From the first the work was interesting; I've enjoyed typing the case records. At first I made some funny mistakes until I learned social work terminology. It's never lost its interest for me; I still enjoy the work and the people."

In April 1946, Betty, the only blind girl to take the test, passed the merit system exams so that she attained permanent status. They were difficult exams. She had to take shorthand, transcribe, type neatly and without errors, but she passed with high marks.

We have found her to be efficient, disposing of cylinders so fast we sometimes are hard pressed to keep her occupied. Her speed on her Braille shorthand machine is such that she takes dictation as fast as we can talk. Betty has become somewhat of a lecturer as she has had to explain the workings of her machine many times to interested visitors. The machine is a small rectangular instrument made by Perkins Institute. There is a space bar surrounded

by six wooden keys by which it is possible to punch out all possible word combinations and abbreviations on strips of thin white paper. These rolls of paper, later held on her lap, make it possible for her to "read" her shorthand with minimum effort.

Betty at 22, is a poised, self-reliant girl, with no traces of her former shyness. She handles her own finances, paying board like the rest of the family. A recent operation removing her right eye was met totally by her Blue Cross and savings.

She now finds herself with little time for reading, although talking books and Braille books from Perkins are always available. She listens to the radio, keeping up-to-date on current events, interspersed with plays, mysteries which the rest of her family like, and music, especially popular. She loves to play the piano, picking up new tunes from the radio, and still cherishes the ambition to sing on the air. She had her first "mike" experience as a finalist in the "Bob Hope Contest." She entered a local theatre contest and has often been featured in local entertainments.

PART OF THE "GANG"

BETTY SHARES wholeheartedly in the work, and after hours, the play of the Pawtucket Welfare Department, a staff of nearly forty. No party would be complete without songs by Betty. In our lunchroom she is always the center of a happy, chattering group. She is the first to offer sympathy to anyone in trouble; she is the first to say "no gripes" when the clerical staff is asked for comments.

Her work reflects her orderly, efficient nature. Records, summaries, reports and letters leave her desk with rarely a correction. One of the other clerks locates the records for Betty, and gives quick help if something goes wrong, but most of the day her typewriter with its rapid chatter, marks the end of another transcribed cylinder. She is never too busy to bring that extra record up-to-date, to smile and say "why sure" whenever a request is made.

What the future holds for Betty we cannot foretell. As she says so often, "I wish more people knew how important it is for the blind to be with sighted people; being only with other blind makes you even more withdrawn. It's wonderful to be a clerk-stenographer, to play a small part in helping others; I'd like everyone to know how they could help us, not only in employment, but by getting young people to urge young blind people to join their recreational activities. It's so good for them."

Our Program of Relative Responsibility

by JOHN A. LAITINEN, Supervisor
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Billings, Montana

THE PROBLEM OF responsibility of relatives continues to be a moot question among welfare agencies. Some states have tried forcing relative contribution to indigents through law, some have disregarded the matter of relative responsibility altogether, while others have had programs varying from one extreme to the other. In the State of Montana the law provides that certain relatives must assist indigents "if they are able and willing." The Social Security Act provides, as well as the Montana Public Welfare Act, that all income and resources available to the applicant or recipient must be taken into consideration in determining eligibility. Certainly some relatives are a resource and all relatives are a resource in one way or another, if not always financially.

We have not solved the matter of relative responsibility in our local agency, but feel that we have made some progress in the last year or eighteen months. I shall herewith try to give some of the particulars regarding our program in the hope that it may be of some value to others.

AGENCY BUDGET OVERDRAWN

THE MONTANA STATE Department of Public Welfare has for many years recommended contact of relatives who may be able to contribute. However, local agencies found the matter discouraging due to the resistance encountered and the lack of results so that much work with relatives was left unfinished. Prior to the spring of 1947 no concerted effort had been made in our local agency toward getting in touch with relatives and what contacts had been made had not proven successful generally. Increasing demands were being made upon the welfare department to supply dental and optical needs of various recipients and applicants as well as medicine and hospitalization not available in the county hospital.

Lay sentiment, part of which was expressed through the local County Welfare Board, showed that the public was not in favor of public funds being used as a primary source for meeting all of the needs of assistance recipients. This feeling was also expressed by some of the physicians treating cases in

need of medical care. Under the Montana program all the needs of individuals over the federal match maximum of the various categories, including all the needs for general relief recipients, must be met from county funds. In Yellowstone County, the county side medical and hospital budget had been overdrawn for several years, and during the year 1946 it was overdrawn more than twice the original budget.

In working out the budget needs for old age assistance and aid to needy blind applicants and recipients under current budget standards, total budget needs frequently exceeded the federal maximum. As our state maximum is the same as the federal maximum for these two categories, it meant that any unmet need should be met through county general relief funds.

The County Board, which also is the Board of County Commissioners, did not approve the supplementation of these grants with general relief except in the most urgent cases and formulated the policy that no margins of small unmet need would be met from general relief funds. Clients were to be encouraged to meet extra expenses by themselves as county poor fund budgets could not be increased. So the only way of meeting the unmet need among these recipients had to be found. In probing for solution, we decided to make a concerted effort to reach relatives and others who, from a review of the agency records, seemed in a position to contribute. We also felt that clients could help themselves more than they had been.

USE OF RESOURCES

SOME REVISION WAS necessary in our thinking about our philosophy of the program. We strengthened the idea that the public welfare program was responsible in helping persons, who seek the services of our agency, to think through their problems, and arrive at decisions and conclusions in such a way as to be conscious of the importance of using constructively the resources outside of the agency. Much discussion was also held regarding the manner of approach to clients and responsible relatives in interpreting the program to them. We felt that in the process

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